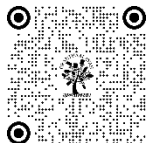# SINGING THE SONGS OF SORROW: A STUDY OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY THROUGH RIMA DAS' BULBUL CAN SING

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines Rima Das' film Bulbul Can Sing (2018) from the perspective of gender and sexuality. Made in Assamese, it is a coming-of-age story of three friends who have to find their identity, sexuality, and voice through the odds of society. The women characters in the film actively indulge in dialogue and question the traditional patriarchal norms. Indian cinema has mostly constructed a binary with active male and passive female; in this film, the binary is dismantled. The film also subverts the male gaze, making the female not an object of desire but someone who has control over their desires and fantasies. It is a fact that women have to struggle to find their way within the oppressive social framework, and men too have to succumb to the dominant idea of being. Apart from exploring the trope of 'Women's Cinema' and cinema by women filmmakers in India, the paper studies the cinematic shots regarding Bulbul Can Sing to decode various natural tropes and images used as part of the narrative, keeping Auteur theory in mind. The paper also looks into the dominion of female desire and agency concerning Rima Das's cinema. The paper examines how patriarchy works regressively towards creating and circulating the idea of masculine and feminine. The last part of the paper deals with the issues of patriarchy and toxic masculinity and the impact of the same on the larger mobility of individuals within the social fabric.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Assam, Women's Cinema

1. INTRODUCTION

Cinema has been a significant device of not just conveying stories and ideas, but it has also been an effective medium to highlight issues of concern and relevance. Herbert Read (1932), in his essay "Towards a film aesthetic", argues that film is an art that is still in the process of being. Since cinema is dependent on technology to a large extent, it goes through a process of change on a daily basis. Read (1932) states further that cinema "must be composed directly out of the lumbering material of actual visible world" (p. 7). This statement by Read resonates with the corpus of Rima Das's work as a filmmaker. Starting from Village Rockstars (2017) to Bulbul Can Sing (2018), Rima Das has been able to weave narratives with the minimum budget and limited resources. Often, her narratives are tied up to the lumbering

material of the world. Das has been able to initiate a conversation around the issue of gender and sexuality through her work; however, cinema from the North East remains marginal even now when it comes to the issue of reception and circulation outside the North East. In India, popular cinema often resonates with Hindi Cinema. However, the hegemony of Hindi Cinema is gradually fading away. What is concerning is that regional films that address social and political issues still struggle to reach a wider audience.

Perhaps one needs to ask what constitutes the idea of the popular when it comes to cinema. Stuart Hall (1981), in his essay "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" argues that before one attempts to understand the term 'popular culture' in its entirety, perhaps one may need to raise the question of whose culture gets to be a part of popular culture? Hall states that the study of popular culture is directly associated with the study of labour history and its institutions (p. 230). The study of labour history could reflect upon the domination of dominant groups on the idea of culture. Therefore, the culture of the working/marginal class could never formulate the definition of popular, let alone culture. Moreover, Hall goes on to mention that "there is no whole, authentic, autonomous 'popular culture' which lies outside the field of force of the relations of cultural power and domination" (p. 232). Furthermore, the dominant groups constantly reorganise and disorganise the very definition of popular culture within the range of dominant forms (p. 233). As far as the issue of 'cultural power and domination' is concerned, Das through her works, attempts to renegotiate the idea of popular by bringing in narratives that often remain ignored by the dominant groups.

2. COUNTERING THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN THROUGH WOMEN'S CINEMA

From the inception of Indian cinema, the narrative about women revolved around symbols of virtue, sacrifice, and purity. Any act of their transgression from the 'ideal' behaviour met with detrimental consequences. Women characters rarely have the agency to control the narrative. The active male/ passive female binary has existed in different forms of popular culture. Indian cinema, television shows, and music have often portrayed girls and women as meek, docile, and subjected to the whims and fancies of the male. This hierarchical relationship is a mirror of Indian society.

Women's cinema is diverse; it includes movies from many different genres, regions, languages, and styles. Alison Butler (2002) defines women's cinema as films that "might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women" or include all of these (p. 1). However, not all female filmmakers like their works to be recognised as part of what is called 'women's cinema.' For them, creating such a category leads only to their marginalisation and the neglect of their work in the mainstream. Women, particularly in the West, have always been a part of filmmaking, yet the notion of women's cinema dates back only to the late 1960s. With women's access to means of production, the engagement with characters through women's perspective became possible. This change was seen as an upshot of the feminist movements and feminism that began encompassing every aspect of people's lives (Bulter, 2002, pp. 2–3). The perspective of women became possible only with women's access to the means of production.

It would be erroneous to say that the representation of women has been missing in cinema. Though most of the production has revolved around male protagonists, with women appearing on screens only to aid in sustaining or

developing the male characters, there are works where female characters are given the lead role. The mis/representation of women and the characterization of women in the binary of 'good' and 'bad' have been critiqued from time to time. Feminist film theory, which evolved gradually, was concerned with the ways the medium of the screen was used to reduce women as objects. A key critic of the visual medium is Laura Mulvey; she notices that in cinema, women are objects of the 'male gaze.' Mulvey (1989), in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," talks about the need to create "a new language of desire" (p. 16). She argues for using entirely different cinematic and narrative strategies instead of producing feminist works within the mainstream domain.

It is in the "negation of visual and narrative pleasure" that the idea of women's cinema as counter cinema can be drawn (Butler, 2002, p. 7). The works that fall within the spectrum of counter-cinema are the ones that challenge and subvert the dominant narrative style and storyline. The approach towards women and counter cinema is slightly different when it comes to the critic Claire Johnston. Her essay titled "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" was first published in 1973. Unlike other feminist film theorists, she does not vocalize for women's counter-cinema to be entirely political and instructive at the expense of pleasure. She points out that one should not altogether discard the aspect of pleasure, which, according to her, is the reason for the success of Hollywood. Thus, she urges, "In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of entertainment film" (Johnston, 2014, p. 355). Johnston has the understanding that women's counter cinema can develop within the "parameters of entertainment and thus the mainstream film, as long as it challenges the signs and ideology of its dominant values" (Jenkins, 2021, p. 1181).

3. FEMALE NARRATIVES BY INDIAN WOMEN FILMMAKERS

The director's role is taken as primary when it comes to filmmaking. The involvement of women in Indian cinema has changed the status quo of the male-female binary. At the foremost level, the binary is knocked down as women are actively engaged as directors and, at the second level, by channelizing women's narratives. Several women filmmakers have taken to the "sensitive portrayals of women protagonists, in search of social and sexual identity, women firmly located in specific socio-historical contexts" (Datta, 2000, p. 73). A few notable films on women and directed by women are; 36 Chowringhee Lane (1981), Parama (1985), Sati (1989), Yugant (1995) and Paromitar Ek Din (2000) by Aparna Sen; Sparsh (1980), Chashme Buddoor (1981), and Katha (1982) by Sai Paranjpye; Rudaali (1993) and Darmiyaan (1997) by Kalpana Lajmi; Fire (1996) and Water (2005) by Deepa Mehta; English Vinglish (2012) by Gauri Shinde; Margherita with a Straw (2014) by Shonali Bose; Parched (2015) by Leena Yadav; Raazi (2018) by Meghna Gulzar; and Bulbbul (2020) by Anvita Dutt Gupta.

In addition to a well-rounded representation of females through narration, some women directors have artistically played with cinematic visuals in order to distort the conventional meaning. For instance, in most of Aparna Sen's films, the protagonist is a woman who comes across circumstances that make her aware of her needs and desires, and she seeks the path towards satisfaction. Themes like adultery, forbidden desires, unhappy marriages, and loneliness are explored; the women come out stronger under societal pressures. Moreover, Sai Paranjpye's films indulge in subverting the connotation of several 'codes' and 'tropes' inherent in Indian visual culture. In an article, Tholia and Singh (2022) discuss Sai's works as

producing a 'female gaze,' which aims to recontextualize male-oriented cinematic codes. An American director, Jill Soloway (2016), has pointed out the traits of the 'female gaze'. First, it involves "feeling seeing," that is, experiencing and perceiving through emotions rather than just observation. It can be likened to a 'subjective camera' that seeks to delve into the emotions of the protagonist. Instead of focusing solely on visual representation, the Female Gaze utilizes the frame to convey and elicit a sense of "being in feeling, rather than seeing the characters." Second, it uses the camera in an attempt to portray what it is like to be "the object of the gaze," and lastly, it "dares to return the gaze." By returning the gaze to the male viewer, the female no longer remains an object but becomes the subject in her own right (Soloway).

When it comes to the Assamese film industry, there are women filmmakers like Suprabha Devi (the first women director of Assam), Manju Bora, Dr Santwana Borah, Dr Bobby Sarma Baruah, Reema Borah and Rima Das. Two works worthy of praise are Dr Santwana Borah's Adajya – The Flight (1996), adapted from Indira Goswami's The Moth-Eaten Howdah of The Tusker and Manju Bora's Joymoti – the Savior (2006), adapted from Jyoti Prasad Agarwalla's film Joymoti. The filmmakers have revisited "existing women's narratives" through their "thematic content and the formal aesthetic" (Chaudhuri, 2014, p. 101). As auteurs, they succeeded in re-writing and re-presenting the women in their films, giving them more agency.

Thus, women's cinema works towards portraying women as a desiring subject rather than a subject of desire. The desire is for autonomy – social, political, cultural, sexual – and a shift from being the "bearer" of meaning to being the "maker" of meaning. (Mulvey, 1989, p. 15). Apart from that, it challenges gender stereotypes and interrogates the patriarchal framework.

4. RIMA DAS' AUTEURSHIP

Rima Das's Village Rockstars (2017) and Bulbul Can Sing (2018) have made noteworthy contributions to the Assamese film industry. Both the films are set in rural lower Assam, and the element of nature has been used extensively. Rima Das' films qualify as 'regional' cinema in the true sense. Regional cinema generally refers to cinema produced in languages different from the mainstream one, as in the case of India, the mainstream being Bollywood or Hindi films.

The locale used by Rima Das is crucial not only in terms of marking its regionality but also in how she functions as an auteur. The auteur theory, developed from the cinematic theories of two French critics, Andre Bazin and Alexandre Astruc, subscribes to giving the director the sole credit for filmmaking. In this approach to studying films, three premises are considered: the 'technique,' 'personal style,' and 'interior meaning' (Sarris, 2008, p. 43). The 'technique' draws attention to the efficiency and involvement an auteur shows in the film-making process. Considering Rima Das' works, one sees her engagement in multiple roles as director, co-producer, writer, and editor.

Das' style can be termed as 'realist,' and her films have the element of rawness; this is brought forth by her choice of non-professional actors, the Nalbariya (lower Assam) dialect as against the standard Assamese dialect, and the natural rural backdrop. The synchronization of nature with the characters defines one in relation to the other. One finds a similar theme worked upon in Village Rockstars and Bulbul Can Sing; both deal with the issue of gender in a patriarchal society in rural Assam. While Village Rockstars' focus is on a ten-year-old girl who just reached puberty, Bulbul Can Sing delves into the lives of adolescents and the transitional period of

adolescence. The stories are delineated from the female perspective. Das articulates in an interview that their issues must be presented subtly and through organic visuals rather than shoving them towards the audience (Biswas, 2019).

Das works out the cinematic techniques while keeping in mind the uniqueness of the storyline and the theme. In Das' films, every element on the screen is presented in a certain way and conveys something, a characteristic feature of an auteur. In an interview, the filmmaker talks about the distinct visuals of Bulbul Can Sing and Village Rockstars. She states:

I made both films in the same village. But the lives of teenagers are more complicated, which speaks from the framing and editing. Using the perspective of a teenager, my eyes, and therefore my camera works differently. This happens automatically if you're authentic to your characters. (Hermans, 2019, p. 30)

The third premise, 'interior meaning,' resonates with the idea that the director is the author whose vision and worldview are brought to light in front of the audience through his/her works. Rima Das' first-hand experiences of things that are part and parcel of village life in Assam enabled her to portray them most accurately. Both films, directed by Rima Das, are about dreams and ambitions, breaking free of boundaries and finding hope and freedom. These meanings are infused in the narrative and the cinematic codes - reframed in the female gaze.

5. ANALYSIS
5.1. NATURE IMAGERY AND FEMALE DESIRES

Bulbul Can Sing showcases two girls in their adolescence, a transitional period where several changes take place at the mental and physical levels. It is a crucial phase of one's life for the subject is curious about many things, one of them being sensual desire. The film disrupts the customary narrative of females being the centre of male desire by placing the female characters' desire at the centre. The two girls, Bulbul and Bonny, fall in love with boys of their age, and they engage in displays of affection towards their partners. Das, however, puts more emphasis on the change that the girls go through and the ways they try to come to terms with it. Here, the element of sensuousness is conveyed to the audience through nature imagery. There are scenes where one can see Bulbul and Bonny around natural objects. In the first scene, there is a close-up shot of Bulbul lying down amidst the fallen blooms of the flower Erythrina or modar. According to Swikriti Dowerah (2020), "[t]he deep red of the flower represents their flaming young hearts, which though natural and pure remains outside the acceptable bounds of society." While the flower hints at the growing playfulness of youth on the one hand, in the latter part, it is also used to symbolize contamination. Dowerah quotes Assamese singer Bhupen Hazarika's song Modarore Phul Henu Pujatu Nelage, meaning that the flower modar is not offered to God. Thus, the flower acts as a symbol of desire and yearning, which are constrained and tabooed.

In the very early scene of the film, the three friends are seen on a tree tying ropes for the swing when Suman cautions Bulbul against letting her hair down. He points out that a girl had hanged herself on a tree a few days back. The reason behind the girl's death is not clear. However, one can assume that she suffered the same fate as Bonny did in the end, since following Bonny's death, there is gossip about how Bonny's ghost would haunt the villagers. Suman further says, "If a young girl dies, she doesn't get salvation. Since their dreams haven't been fulfilled they won't allow anyone else's either" (Das, 2018, 2:13). This particular anecdote reveals two things: one, the story of the ghost of a girl is produced and circulated as a reminder of the

consequences of transgression, and two, the reinforcement of the stereotyping phrase 'women are their own worst enemies.' Though Bulbul hesitates to accept this explanation, she ties up her hair out of some fear. Thus, the tree gets linked with negative energy because it is host to some spirit. Besides, the physical qualities of the tree – tall and giant – symbolizes the rigid and unbent rules of the patriarchal society towards girls and women. Any woman who tries to take agency is met with detrimental consequences. Das, however, juxtaposes this narrative with one where the tree is a companion to the female characters, where they feel and caress the tree.

The film poster depicts the three friends in a swing hung from a tree. Interestingly, the swing was or still is associated with many different things in different cultures; it is used for various purposes – healing, warding off evil, transformation, celebration, and even punishment. In Indian culture, there are paintings of Lord Krishna swinging with his gopis around him, thus signifying love and desires (Moscoso, 2023). Moscoso conceptualizes the experience of swaying back and forth as a form of liberation from societal rules and norms (Moscoso, 2023, p. 223). In the context of the film, it is an illustration of the adolescent phase characterized by playfulness and carefree nature. However, on probing deep, one realises the prospects and endeavours of these 'bodies in motion' invite unwarranted punishments. Like the flower and tree image, the swing also points at paradoxical situations.

In the later part of the film, there are two scenes with water in succession; in the first scene, one sees Bonny sitting near marshy land, and in the second, Bulbul playing with the water. Immediately after, the camera shifts to Bonny being carried by two villagers. The filmmaker uses nature as a zone of conflict between sacred and profane, female autonomy versus patriarchy. She makes use of natural elements to show opposing tendencies – they contrarily symbolize the enabling/disabling of women's agency.

5.2. THE FEMALE AGENCY – CAN BULBUL SING?

In the film, Bulbul constantly engages in questioning the stereotypes and regulations placed on women, primarily young girls. By depicting teenagers in the film, Rima Das shows the ways in which the female subjects are being moulded in a patriarchal framework. The roles taught and imparted by several institutions, starting right from the family, is what Simone de Beauvoir talks about in The Second Sex. In a scene in Bulbul Can Sing, Bulbul's mother rebukes her, saying, "Why are you always angry? Girls should behave well. You should be calm" (Das, 2018, 27:12). In another scene, we can see Bulbul again being scolded by her mother for wearing a short frock. As a teenager, Bulbul does not care much about these societal and gendered norms. She even laughs and shares it with her friends when her mother rebukes her for her dress.

The film acquaints one with how societal and family institutions work towards the cultivation of 'docile bodies.' Foucault's work is more relevant in times when everything is controlled and monitored. Feminists have used Foucault's idea to talk about how patriarchy dictates terms for a woman's body. What a female does with her body, instead of being a personal matter, is professed as a public concern. The two girls and their lovers, after being seen engaged in a display of affection, are humiliated and tortured by the men who take responsibility as being 'preservers' of their culture and morality. They rather seem to take delight in punishing them as they also capture videos of the abuse. The idea of morality is a nuanced one; it works towards sustaining the masculinist stance. Every institution – family, schools, society, media – plays its part in the task of 'reforming' the 'deviants' through moral

policing. In the film, the media targets these teenagers and makes them objects of spectacle. Secondly, the school authorities decide to expel them from the school because they believe "if [they] don't set an example, they will become a role model for other children" (Das, 2018, 1:07:59). The teachers choose to guard the reputation of their school rather than look after the well-being of the students. It is tragic to see such an innocent act censored to the extent that Bulbul's father arranges for a purification ritual intending to wash away her 'sins' and reclaim her purity. While Bulbul is strong enough to go through these, Bonny, on the other hand, commits suicide. Two questions arise here: one, is the act of love a sin that he/she is made to pay for it and two, how do women's bodies become the site for control and domination?

The title Bulbul Can Sing is highly significant; the act of singing is both literal and metaphorical. An individual voluntarily engages themself in singing, which often comes from within. Bulbul, one of the protagonists, is forced by her father to learn to sing. However, it is seen in many scenes that she cannot perform well in singing. It is Bonny, her friend, who is considered better than her. Singing also symbolizes power, the ability to get hold of one's life and live on one's terms. Bulbul's singing ability is shown as inadequate until the film's last part. The phase of life that Bulbul is in is very critical; the adolescent stage is one where one is no longer a child but is also not an adult yet. The transition is characterised by curiosity regarding one's body and growing desires and needs, both emotional and sexual. With the censorship placed by most Indian societies, particularly on young girls, overtly and covertly, it becomes difficult for them to express themselves. Bulbul sings beautifully when she is alone in the woods, with no one to hear her. It can be assumed that she has found her voice and has finally come to terms with her life. However, this knowledge has come with a cost, that is, the life of her friend. Thus, it can be said that for women, rising above societal norms is not an easy navigation; it is a road paved with hurdles.

5.3. PATRIARCHY AND TOXIC MASCULINITY

Society assigns the attributes 'masculine' and 'feminine' to males and females, respectively. It is a cultural construct where certain qualities are ascribed to each sex. Anything that does not fall within the prescribed attributes is seen as abnormal or lacking something. Society works regressively towards producing and promoting heteronormative behaviour. The discourse on gender fluidity is limited mostly to academics; the social order still works on the belief in fixed and stable categories. Suman's character in the film challenges the society-constructed binary by embodying certain attributes that fall within the purview of popular feminine characteristics as per the dominant code of behaviour. There are suggestions about Suman being a queer character, although his sexuality and sexual orientation are not explicit in the film. The audience is prevented from making any firm assertion about or defining where Suman fits in. Suman's character rather exemplifies the uncertainty of one's sexuality in the growing years.

The film portrays Suman's character as akin to the two girls; they take pleasure in activities like drenching in the rain, running around the fields, doing each other's hair, collecting flowers, and making garlands. There are also scenes where these three friends are seen lying on the bed beside each other and bathing together. Acts considered inappropriate by conservative society are normalized by Rima Das. Shubhra Gupta (2019), in her review of the film, states, "Watching them share physical space, sprawled on a bed or on the ground, limbs carelessly bushing against each other, bound by deep affection, not desire, is to see something rare in Indian

cinema". The film demonstrates that love and friendship go beyond the boundaries of sex and gender. Upon further consideration, it could also mean that because the villagers consider Suman as effeminate, his closeness with the girls does not become an issue for them. The term effeminate is used to describe a man who shows attributes like delicacy, softness, and tenderness – traits considered feminine and associated with women. Hennen believes that a misogynist attitude is inherent in the term itself. Analysing the attributes used to define such a person, Hennen asserts:

Each of the attributes included could easily be recast in a positive light ("soft" becomes "sensitive and understanding"; "delicacy" becomes "refinement"; "unmanly traits, tastes and habits" indicate the cultured man of good breeding; "self-indulgence" becomes something like "taking care of yourself"). The critical component seems to be "womanish," along with the fact that the term is used almost exclusively as a pejorative, and in most contemporary usage strongly suggests homosexuality. (Hennen, 2023, pp. 21–22)

In Bulbul Can Sing, Suman is endlessly bullied by his friends and adults and gets the nickname "ladies." At the school, he is mocked by male students; they ask him to use the girls' toilet and try to pull his pants down. Again, at a cultural event, some boy teases Suman:

Ladies, where are your bangles? Do you need lipstick? We don't have any. Go and be with girls. Why are you dressing up like a man? Doesn't suit you… (Das, 2018, 30:20)

Similar to 'effeminate,' the word 'ladies' here becomes mocking and contemptuous work, reinforcing the perception of the female sex as inferior. The filmmaker, however, overthrows this misconception about women being inferior through the scene where women also take part in fishing. Furthermore, there are various occasions when Bulbul and Bonny show courage – for example, they stand up to the boys in support of Suman and rebuke a man for staring at them.

Suman is traumatized by the way he gets treated in his village. Bulbul and Bonny being his only friends, he pours his heart out to them. He laments, "How is it my fault? God made me like this. Am I the only one in the world like this?" (Das, 2018, 43:18) The next scene shows another man being called 'ladies,' and thus, draws attention to the fact that there are people with their differences. Throughout, the film celebrates the dynamic human character and relationships. Suman comes out as a strong character who does not shy away from being who he is and doing what he wants. He accepts his body and does not try to conform to society's definition of normalcy. The film raises awareness against the harmful culture of shaming individuals for being different from the majority.

6. CONCLUSION

At present, when binaries of all kinds are becoming part of everyday life, Das' work attempts to reimagine the everyday in such a way, wherein individuals can find power in their vulnerabilities. Through her work, Das conveys that one does not have to align with the oppressive definition of normativity as imagined by the popular consensus. While the world continues to live within set definitions of behaviour, Das and her characters question the fixity of such a definition to imagine a world where identities without borders can coexist. Das renders a strong critique of the interference of institutions like family, media, school, and society when it comes to the issue of gender and sexuality concerning both male and female and those who may not subscribe to this binary. Das also highlights the culture of media

trials concerning the issue of love. Patriarchy views love outside marriage as an act of pollution, and it can never tolerate the fact that girls make choices on their own when it comes to being in love with someone. Bonny's suicide needs to be seen as an act of murder propelled by the regressive forces of society who want to shame girls for not acting docile. The yardstick of morality remains far more flexible concerning the behaviour of boys; however, girls need to be reminded and penalised if they go against the flawed and abstract framework of morality. While patriarchy exercises control over girls, it does not either spare the boys who do not fit within the notion of masculinity. Suman's helplessness directly results from the kind of humiliation he has to face for being non-masculine. Every act of shame is to remind Suman that he must change if he is to fit in society. While Indian Cinema is gradually moving towards cinema that is sensitive to the characters that are located within the trope of marginality, there is still a long way to go in normalising characters that defy the conventional and rigid definition and understanding of gender and sexuality.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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